

## Positive shock

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# Positive Shock: A Consumer Ethical Judgement Perspective

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## Abstract

Existing debates on business ethics under-represent consumers' perspectives. In order to progress understanding of ethical judgement in the marketplace, we unpack the interconnections between consumer ethical judgment, consent and context. We address the question of how consumers judge the morality of threat-based experiential marketing communications. Our interpretive qualitative research shows that consumers can feel positively about being shocked, judging threat appeals as more or less ethical by the nature of the negative emotions they experience. We also determine that the intersection between ethical judgement, consent and context lies where consumers' perceptions of fairness and consequences lend contextualised normative approval to marketing practice. Our research makes three original contributions to existing literature. First, it extends theory in the area of ethical judgement, by highlighting the importance of consent for eliciting positive moral responses. Second, it adds to embryonic research addressing the role of emotions in ethical judgement, by ascertaining that negative emotions can elicit positive consumer ethical judgement. Third, our research contributes an original concept to ethical judgement theorisation, namely consumer-experienced positive shock (CEPS). We define CEPS as a consensual shock value judged as ethical due to its ephemerality, commercial resonance, brand alignment, target-audience appropriateness and contextual acceptability. We also extrapolate the dimensions of CEPS into an ethical judgement typology, elucidating how consumers judge some threat-based communications as ethical, but not others. Consequently, our work dovetails with wider business ethics debates on ethical judgement, adding value by clarifying the conditions that generate positive consumer ethical judgement.

**Keywords** Consumer ethical judgement · Advertising ethics · Consent · Shock · Threat appeals · Film marketing

## Introduction

Existing debates on marketing ethics, and business ethics more broadly, under-represent consumers' perspectives (Shabbir et al. 2018). As consumers are the ultimate judges of what might constitute ethical marketing (Shabbir et al. 2018; Skipper and Hyman 1993), this is an area deserving additional research attention. Existing literature tends to examine ethical judgement in organisational contexts (Trevino 1992; Jones 1991, 2009; Lindebaum et al. 2017), or

the link between ethical judgement and consumers' own ethical or unethical behaviours (Hunt and Vitell 1986; Vitell and Muncy 1992, 2005; Vitell et al. 2016). To progress understanding of ethics in the marketplace, it is important to further application of descriptive ethics (Nill and Schibrowsky 2007). Therefore, we unpack the flexible, multidimensional interconnections between consumer ethical judgment, consent and context. Applying Miller and Wertheimer's (2010) theory of consent transactions, we determine that the intersection between ethical judgement, consent and context lies where consumer perceptions of fairness and consequences lend contextualised normative approval to marketing practice. Our work dovetails with wider business ethics debates on ethical judgement (McMahon and Harvey 2006; Nguyen and Biderman 2008; Trevino 1992), clarifying the criteria and conditions that can generate positive consumer ethical judgement.

We achieve this by examining consumers' ethical judgements of promotional campaigns using threat appeals that

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elicit negative emotions including fear, shock or distress. The creative appeals used in marketing communications can push consumers' moral boundaries (Beltramini 2003; Jeurissen and Van de Ven 2006). Thus, we speak to growing literature addressing micro-level ethical issues in advertising (Drumwright and Kamal 2016; Drumwright 2007), but from a consumer perspective.

Recent resonant literature engages critically with the use of threat appeals in advertising execution strategies, focusing particularly on what consumers find morally questionable (Putrevu and Swimberghek 2013; Sabri 2017). Indeed, consumers can perceive threat appeals as offensive and, consequently, unethical (Dahl et al. 2003; Prendergast et al. 2002). However, this is not always the case (Shabbir et al. 2018; Kadic-Maglajlić et al. 2017). Advertisements using threat can generate positive outcomes for consumers (Alba and Williams 2013). This divergence exists because consumers' ethical judgements of advertising are relational and situational (Ha 1996). In experiential communication contexts, these judgements may depend on how threat appeals are used and mediated (Speck and Elliott 1997; Christy and Haley 2008), what emotions they elicit (Singh et al. 2016) and whether they stretch consumers' moral boundaries (Ferreira et al. 2017). This is because experiential marketing communications entail engaging consumers to co-create experiences actively, with brands (Schmitt 2000). Thus, we seek to answer the following research question:

How do consumers judge the morality of threat-based experiential marketing communication campaigns?

We examine this question in the context of horror film marketing, given the congruent alignment between the genre's threat appeals and the emotional responses horror communication campaigns elicit from their audiences, for hedonic consumption purposes (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Alba and Williams 2013). In doing so, we establish the novel concept of consumer-experienced positive shock (CEPS), which we define as an end-of-spectrum, consensual shock value that consumers judge as ethical due to dimensions including ephemerality, commercial resonance, post-experience brand congruence, target-audience appropriateness and contextual acceptability. Consequently, we examine the limits and possibilities of consent as morally transformative of ethical judgement, through the protection and promotion of consumers' interests and autonomy, in instances where consumers might otherwise judge marketing communications as unethical.

Therefore, this research makes three contributions to existing literature. First, it extends theory in the area of ethical judgement, by highlighting the importance of perceived consent for eliciting positive moral responses. Second, it adds to embryonic research addressing the role of emotions in ethical judgement, hitherto mainly addressed as a rational process (Singh et al. 2016). It does this by ascertaining that

negative emotions can elicit positive consumer ethical judgement. Third, our research contributes an original concept to ethical judgement theorisation, namely CEPS. As we extrapolate the dimensions of CEPS into a shock judgement typology, we clarify how consumers judge some threat-based communications as ethical, but not others, drawing on criteria that can be adapted to additional business contexts. Finally, we highlight relevant ethics-driven managerial implications for threat-based marketing communication strategies based on consumer experience and immersion.

## Conceptual Context

### Consumer Ethical Judgement

Reidenbach and Robin (1990, p. 634) define ethical judgement as the "degree to which a portrayal, event, or behaviour is morally acceptable to the individual." Consequently, consumer ethical judgement entails a consumer's evaluation of what is good or bad, right or wrong, morally acceptable or unacceptable (McMahon and Harvey 2006; Nguyen and Biderman 2008; Trevino 1992; Ferreira et al. 2017). Subjective values, moral norms and principles affecting consumer attitudes and behaviour underpin these evaluations (Awasthi and Singhal 2014; Treise et al. 1994).

Many studies highlight how deontological and teleological principles shape consumers' ethical judgements (Hunt and Vitell 1986); the former focusing on universal principles and categorical imperatives (Pratt and James 1994), and the latter on consequences of actions (Brunk 2012; Shaw et al. 2017). However, consumers' ethical judgements are more flexible, tending to combine deontological and consequentialist assessments (Brunk 2012), and fairness judgements (Treise et al. 1994). Further, many ethical decision-making models collectively suggest that individual, situational and socio-cultural factors affect ethical judgement processes, highlighting the role of intrinsic religiosity (Singh et al. 2016; Vitell et al. 2006; Vitell and Paolillo 2003), and consumer emotions in consumers' moral evaluations (Singh et al. 2016; Dalman et al. 2017).

Existing research suggests that negative judgements of adverts impact attitude towards the ad, the brand and purchase intention negatively (Simpson et al. 1998; Beltramini 2006; Ferreira et al. 2017). When it comes to understanding moral responses to marketing communications, much of the focus has tended towards threat appeals in advertising (Kerr et al. 2012).

While consumers can judge threat-based marketing communications as morally questionable (Putrevu and Swimberghek 2013; Sabri 2017; Dahl et al. 2003; Prendergast et al. 2002), they can also judge them as ethical (Shabbir et al. 2018; Kadic-Maglajlić et al. 2017). Indeed, marketing

communications using threat can lead to positive consumer perceptions and outcomes (Tannenbaum et al. 2015). Thus, we suggest that consumer ethical judgement “is surprisingly malleable, prone to bias, informed by intuition and implicit associations, and swayed by mere circumstance” (Sundar and Kellaris 2017, p. 685)—and that this applies to their judgements of threat-based communications.

### Threat-Based Experiential Marketing Communications

Threat appeals that cause consumer shock and fear can deliberately “startle and offend audiences by violating norms for social and personal ideals” (Dahl et al. 2003, p. 268). Threat appeal literature focuses on social taboos (Sabri 2017), using communication campaign examples that illuminate ethical issues (Evans and Sumandeep 1993).

Much literature in this area suggests that high threat levels in adverts are detrimental to positive cognitive and affective attitude formation (Williams 2012; Elliot 2003). Excessive threat can “alienate consumers” (Urwin and Venter 2014, p. 203), resulting in undesirable beliefs about experiential campaigns. These beliefs may work to the detriment of the brand (Hsieh et al. 2012; Moore 2015), or the social marketing campaign (Scarpaci and Burke 2016). Positively valenced adverts are often posed as eliciting stronger, longer-lasting attitudes (Eckler and Bolls 2011).

Further research introduces a more nuanced evaluation. Indeed, research suggests that generating anxiety has an effectiveness threshold, after which positive attitudes deplete (Henthorne et al. 1993). Nevertheless, there are benefits of eliciting negative consumer emotions through threat-based communications, because shock and fear capture attention (Dahl et al. 2003; Banyte et al. 2014). Despite these long-standing debates on the effectiveness of shock appeals, recent meta-analytical research suggests that eliciting consumer shock and fear is effective at positively impacting consumer attitudes, intentions and behaviours (Tannenbaum et al. 2015).

We argue these contrasting findings can be understood through recognising the importance of context. Much existing literature, including Tannenbaum et al.’s (2015) work, investigates threat appeals in contexts of behavioural change campaigns. For example, social marketing regularly employs threat appeals to challenge unhealthy and anti-social consumer behaviours (Lennon et al. 2010; Hastings et al. 2004; Cronin and Hopkinson 2017).

However, there are instances where negative emotions such as fear and shock are marketed for consumer enjoyment, with imagery invoking visceral consumer responses of disgust, anger or fear (Hantke 2004; Dobelet al. 2007). Consumers actively enjoy feeling scared when seeking to experience negative affect cathartically, while knowing

they are safe (Williams 2009). This is especially the case in hedonic consumption contexts (Hart et al. 2016), entailing the more playful, multisensory and emotion-driven facets of consumer experience (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Alba and Williams 2013). Hedonic consumption tends to be associated with positive emotions, such as joyfulness and pleasure (Alba and Williams 2013). However, hedonic responses can also contain negative valence, like disgust or fear, and still lead to positive judgement and gratification outcomes (Malone et al. 2014; Alba and Williams 2013).

We extend this argument to experiential marketing communications. The affective power of experiential threat communication lies in the blurring between reality and fiction, amplifying consumers’ hedonic, emotional responses to such communication (Hanich 2011). Thus, we suggest experiential threat in marketing communications can foster a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ in consumers (Tomko 2007), leading to flexible, context-dependent, positive moral evaluations.

### Positive Responses to Threat and eWOM Engagement

Threat-based communications can also foster positive behavioural responses through electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM). A message’s emotional response significantly influences whether it is shared online (Henke 2012; Chen and Berger 2013). The stronger the emotional arousal, the more motivated consumers are to share content online (Binet and Field 2007; Nelson-Field et al. 2013). Sharing can be achieved through arousal of either positive or negative emotions (Berger and Milkman 2010).

Although emotional valence is irrelevant in fostering eWOM, Dobelet al. (2007) and Bailey (2015) advocate achieving a fit between the campaign, appeal type, medium and brand. Additionally, Wilkins and Eisenbraun (2009) purport that threat works in combination with humour to increase message-forwarding intentions. The interpersonal aspects of eWOM are also important, as behavioural intentions strengthen as relevant others actively engage in eWOM.

Shock-induced viral buzz is particularly relevant in hedonic consumption markets, where communication success depends on effective viral marketing (Harris 2001; Mohr 2007). In such contexts, online buzz might entail the presentation of shocking events depicted as true stories, rather than as marketing campaigns (Kerrigan 2017). Such campaigns involve ephemeral deception (Jeurissen and van de Ven 2006; Drumwright 2007). Therefore, they may lead consumers to question the morality of threat-based experiential communications.

## Consent Transactions and Ethical Judgement of Threat-Based Campaigns

We add an original perspective to current debates on ethical judgement by drawing on Miller and Wertheimer's (2010) theory of consent transactions. A broader consideration of consent is needed where consumers might experience visceral emotions without being fully informed, and where the moral norms of marketers and consumers might differ (Wempe 2009).

Consent generally refers to one party agreeing to another doing something (Stannard 2015; Miller and Wertheimer 2010). Where consent is given, a relevant ground for complaint is eliminated (Kleinig 2010; Bergelson 2010). A fundamental issue is whether consent can be morally transformative; this can only occur if valid consent lends normative approval for an act that would otherwise not be allowable (Kleinig 2010; Miller and Wertheimer 2010). Valid consent can be understood as an autonomous, voluntary, intentional and informed agreement or authorisation to proceed with an action (Goodin 1986; Beauchamp 2010).

If valid consent relates to autonomous actors (de Graaf 2006; Heugens et al. 2006), consumers must be understood as acting intentionally, with critical internal capacity for understanding and free from persuasive forces (de Graaf 2006; Heugens et al. 2006). These conditions are problematic in marketing communication contexts, where consumer persuasion is the goal and unequal power relations exist. Within marketing communications, subjective social and cultural norms are pervasive, a universal conception of the agency of moral subjects is non-existent, and actual consumer freedom remains questionable (de Graaf 2006).

These conditions could mean negative consumer ethical judgements of threat-based experiential communications seeking to shock consumers without consent. However, we address this issue by applying Miller and Wertheimer's (2010) view of consent as a bilateral and contextual transaction. Here, the focus is on the fairness of the transaction, where both parties "will mutually consent to an interaction, making them both consenters and recipients of consent" (Miller and Wertheimer 2010, p. 80). Thus, in certain circumstances, it is reasonable and fair for the party seeking consent to believe that the other party has given it. This is particularly applicable if the consent seeker has treated the other fairly, responding to the other's token or expressed consent reasonably, without unfairly seeking advantage (Miller and Wertheimer 2010). Consumers and marketers may lack contextually convergent intentions (Miller and Wertheimer 2010). Nevertheless, it is not always possible for consumers to be fully informed of what they are consenting to in commercial contexts. In threat-based experiential communications, consent would entail consumer agreement to being shocked, which would likely be judged as ethical

but also ineffective regarding its shock value. Relatedly, as ethical judgement entails the degree to which something is morally acceptable to an individual (Reidenbach and Robin 1990), lack of perceived consent could lead to negative consumer ethical judgement.

However, "moral transformation does not always track valid consent" and it can be unfair to both parties to insist on such consent (Miller and Wertheimer 2010, p. 100). Miller and Wertheimer (2010) develop five criteria for moral transformation in what they term fair consent transactions. Three of these criteria are relevant to ethical judgement of threat-based communications. First, competency, information and knowledge are imperfect in consent transactions. Therefore, it is not always possible for consumers to know when and for what purpose they are being shocked at first. Similarly, marketers may be only partially aware of what might be acceptable threat, and under what contexts. Second, autonomous authorisation should not undermine the consent object. Thus, consumers should not be informed that they will experience shock, if this can result in consumers not being shocked for hedonic purposes. Third, the consenter may eschew information or the efforts involved in understanding it. Indeed, consumers often consent to social media or entertainment terms and conditions without reading them. For consent transactions to be morally transformative, there must be responsibility and fairness in respecting all relevant parties' rights, autonomous moral authority to consent and seek it, signification (whether explicit or not), authorisation, competent and informed agency, and voluntariness (Kleinig 2010; Miller and Wertheimer 2010).

Nonetheless, Kleinig (2010) is less flexible, suggesting that consent is primarily a communicative act that alters moral relations between those seeking and those giving consent. For Kleinig (2010), the party seeking consent has no moral right to the object of consent without the consenter's bounded expressed consent. Consequently, consumers may judge threat-based experiential communications as generally unethical, which in turn may have negative implications for consumer attitudes, eWOM engagement and intention to engage in hedonic consumption.

Therefore, there is a need to explore how consumers judge threat-based experiential communications. This is important because it can illuminate how consent intersects with ethical judgement, furthering understanding of what consumers consider ethical marketing and progressing business ethics in the marketplace.

## Methodology and Analytical Process

In-depth understanding of how consumers judge the morality of threat-based experiential campaigns is required to answer the question, how do consumers judge the morality



**Table 1** An overview of the qualitative research methods employed

Method	Number of participants	Participant selection	Setting	Criteria	Duration
In-depth interviews	8	Purposive sampling	One-to-one, face-to-face	Aged 18–26	60 min each
Focus groups	5 in each (10 total)		Group, face-to-face	British	
In-depth interviews	9		One-to-one, face-to-face	Watch horror films Use social media	

**Table 2** Stage one: in-depth interview participants' profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Gender
Samara	22	F
Hoffman	20	M
Annabelle	21	F
Norman	25	M
Freddy	23	M
Chucky	23	M
Shaun	21	M
Jason	25	M

**Table 3** Stage two: focus group participants' profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Gender
Damien	22	M
Hannibal	22	M
Regan	21	F
Christine	19	F
Wes	24	M
Rosemary	18	F
Billy	18	M
Esther	22	F
Ripley	24	F
Myers	23	M

of threat-based experiential marketing communication campaigns? Therefore, we take an interpretivist standpoint, as it affords depth of insight through participants' qualitative experiences, subjectively construed meanings (Spiggle 1994) and pluralistic perspectives (Reinecke et al. 2016). An interpretivist standpoint enables interpretation of emotional and experiential responses (Zaltman 1997; Hart et al. 2016). Consequently, it generates insights that are generalisable within theoretical propositions, rather than to populations (Jamali et al. 2009). Thus, interpretivism can lead to nuanced understandings of the interplay between ethical judgement, consent and context, furthering ethical judgement theorisation.

Participant recruitment for the three-stage qualitative research (Table 1) involved purposive sampling, to satisfy the study's needs (Sekaran 2010). Criteria included British consumers aged 18–26, the typical horror genre demographic (Buder 2016). Participants self-identified as horror film viewers and regularly shared content online. Recruitment for the first two research stages involved a screening questionnaire distributed via Facebook and email, while the third stage relied on a consumer panel. All participants received a research information sheet and consented to taking part.

Experiential horror film communication provides an ideal context for this study, as it can illuminate the complexities enmeshing consumer ethical judgement dimensions. The first research stage involved eight face-to-face in-depth interviews (Table 2). These interviews enable deeper insights on individual moral beliefs and judgements compared to alternative qualitative methods. Participants viewed a range of experiential horror marketing examples with diverse threat appeals, prompting participants' recall of previous horror

film communication experiences. It also ensured the quality of the hour-long research discussions (Comi et al. 2013).

The second stage entailed two focus groups with five participants each. We used small groups to keep conversations focused on relevant themes (Guest et al. 2017), including diverse perspectives on ethical judgements. Small groups added insights into shared ethical judgements of threat-based communications, and how social norms influence these judgements. In this stage (Table 3), participants received 12 hyperlinks to experiential horror film campaigns, which they watched before fieldwork. Groups followed an adapted discussion protocol similar to that used for the interviews, including scenario-based questions to encourage participant understanding (Shiu et al. 2009). As conflicting ethical judgements emerged, we explored them by tackling contrasting opinions in group settings (Hagglund 2017).

The final stage comprised nine additional in-depth interviews, further probing consumer ethical judgements of threat-based campaigns. The purpose of this stage (Table 4) was to clarify positive ethical judgement of being shocked. We asked participants to bring their own examples of what might constitute positive and ethical shock, and showed examples used in prior research stages.

The three data collection stages enabled “the combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study,” which “is best understood as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry” (Denzin 2012, p. 82).

Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We used a thematic approach to data analysis (King and Horrocks 2010; Braun and Clarke 2006),

**Table 4** Stage three: in-depth interview participants' profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Gender
Michael	23	M
Krueger	19	M
Tiffany	24	F
Santanico	21	F
Leatherface	19	M
Dawn	18	F
Ghostface	26	M
Pinhead	25	M
Sadako	21	F

involving: iterative reading of transcripts; inductive data coding to illuminate data patterns; identifying emerging themes; refining themes; and writing up. The writing process addressed the research question and its position regarding existing literature. The process also involved ensuring interpretive quality by respecting participants' views, providing emic evidence of interpretation and emphasising the study's contributions to existing theory (Pratt 2009).

The analytical process led to four key themes addressing consumer ethical judgement of attention-grabbing threat appeals, consumer consent perceptions and ethical judgement, ethical judgements and eWOM engagement, and the role of normative social media interactions. Although not intended as a summary of all findings, Fig. 1 illustrates the concepts within these four themes and their interconnections.

Figure 1 shows seven concept clusters, namely attention, perceived consent, consumer ethical judgement, attitudes toward experiential communications, eWOM, social media

interactions and intention to engage in hedonic consumption. In discussing these concepts, we foreground how consumers judge the morality of threat-based experiential marketing communications. We refer to the horror film campaigns used as stimuli throughout the findings, drawing on quotations to evidence key analytical arguments.

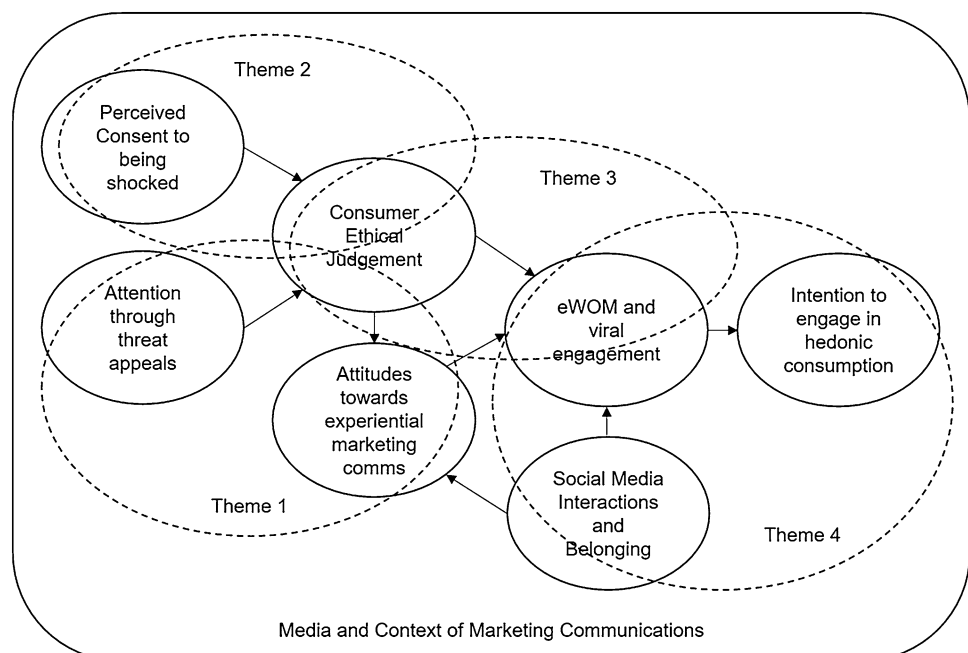
## Findings

This section outlines the key themes emerging from the data, leading to the development of the concept of CEPS and a typology extrapolating its consent and ethical judgement dimensions.

### Attention-Snatching Threat, Attitudes and Ethics

Our findings revealed that vicarious simulation of danger is critical in eliciting consumer attention through experiential horror campaigns. Embodied reactions to threat showed heightened 'attention-grabbing' consumer responses (Fig. 1). Samara, Hoffman and Annabelle (interviewees) repeatedly appraised Resident Evil 6's (2012) *Human Body Shop* campaign, as the appeals utilising gore had high shock value invoking higher concentration. Similarly, Jason (interviewee) "concentrated a lot when watching" the Paranormal Activity [2007] *Experiential Trailer*, noting the audience's "worked-up" reactions. Threat-based experiential campaigns for horror films thus violate everyday norms, spurring attention. Jason (interviewee) highlights why attention is important for horror communication, saying "the more

**Fig. 1** Consumers' responses to threat-based experiential marketing communications



*drawn into a film ad you are, the easier it is to scare you.”* Scaring audiences is the main goal for horror marketers, mimicking the experience of watching the film itself. Shock encourages message retention, which is key to forming long-lasting attitudes:

I remember watching [Paranormal Activity] at the time and thinking it had to be one of the best adverts I’d ever seen. Everything from the font they’ve used to the glitchy screen creates this creepy atmosphere. It reminds me of how I felt when I was watching the film (Shaun, interview).

Shaun’s quote shows that shocking stimuli create fear by simulating danger, which he remembers and re-experiences upon re-watching the advertisement. Shock serves a purpose in horror communications: as Hannibal (focus group) contends, shock through threat is necessary *“to elicit fear, [from which consumers] derive excitement and pleasure.”* Additionally, better attention and attitudes are likely when shock is well-contextualised and considered positive:

IT is closer than you think. IT movie in cinemas September 7.’ ...People clearly took to it, because it was just all over Twitter. [Interviewer: What about if you came across it at night?] Oh, God! That’s a different question. Maybe with a bit of flash [laughs]. [Interviewer: So it would be different coming across [IT balloons] during the day to at night?] Yes, for sure. Especially after watching the film (Michael, interview).

Michael’s quote shows situation and context matter in danger simulation, even for hedonic products where positive and negative emotions can be co-activated through horror film communications.

Participants also highlight ‘boring shock’ as unethical, which shocks ineffectively and purposelessly. Through failed attempts to simulate danger, boring shock impedes memory and positive attitudes. *Take This Lollipop’s* (2011) Facebook application proved consistently unpopular among interviewees. Conflicting with assumptions that its shock value was what perpetuated success, most interviewees found it “boring” or “confusing,” with Norman referencing lack of shock:

It wasn’t very scary or shocking, [so it] didn’t interest me and I won’t remember it. Relatively un-intriguing and trite — oh dear, it’s got the disjointed music that’s meant to set you off (Norman, interview).

The interviewee reflects an overall feeling that the lack of cognitive stimulation left them disappointed by the shocking elements. Ineffective shock is considered purposeless, inhibiting positive attitudes. Therefore, using threat through high shock value in experiential communications for resonant products can improve perceptual selection, attitudes and acceptability. However, the use of threat with low shock

value, or for incongruent products or experiences, can hinder them.

Nevertheless, conflicting attitudes towards threat in horror communications exist. In all research stages, participants perceived appeals differently, affecting their attitudes. Interviewees Freddy and Jason responded differently to the shock value of *Paranormal Activity* (2007) experiential trailer, for example. Freddy was disappointed, expecting higher shock value, with *“someone jumping out in the cinema.”* Conversely, Jason enjoyed it, saying it was *“pretty scary.”* This is explainable: these participants hold different attitudes toward horror films generally. Freddy likes the genre moderately, whereas Jason is an enthusiast. As Morris et al. (2005) argue, this suggests horror devotees have higher levels of involvement with horror films. They are relatively more acquiescent in being shocked by marketing communication because they want visceral experiences of disgust, anger or fear (Hantke 2004; Dobeles et al. 2007) or *“an adrenaline rush”* (Jason, interviewee). Meanwhile, those ambivalent towards the genre do not seek this same thrill; thus, the importance of shock value intensity is reduced. Therefore, the strength of positive attitudinal responses to threat-based experiential appeals, and their moral acceptability, depend on personal interest and involvement. Additionally, these campaigns only work if shock is believable:

Real-life scenarios make viewers feel more intimate connections with the marketed material, sparking subconscious fears of a real occurrence happening to them (Damien, group).

Damien illustrates that the affective power of experiential threat-based communication lies in the blurring between reality and fiction. It amplifies consumers’ emotional responses though willing suspension of disbelief. Rosemary (focus group) elucidates that horror’s appeal lies in the potential for the events to happen in real life. This finding is reinforced by the popularity of the experiential examples:

Trailers shock people less — it’s less of an experience. Horror should be about that experience (Shaun, interview).

While most interviewees preferred experiential campaigns to traditional trailers, Freddy, Tiffany and Pinhead (interviewees) favoured trailers. Their reason was that experiential marketing is *“gimmicky,”* conveying *“marketers don’t have much faith in their film.”* Similarly, while Shaun prefers experientiality to trailers, he also contends that unrealistic threat appeals (e.g. *Rings* 2017) are a *“desperate gimmick,”* resulting in him taking the film *“less seriously.”* Gimmicky experiential shock increases scepticism and is therefore risky. Findings also suggest consumers may prefer subtler, but congruent, threatening stimuli. This is because this type of threat preserves believability without infringing



consumers' moral sensibilities. Talking about the *Baseball Stunt* for Sadako3D (2012), Hoffman argues:

It makes the character not scary anymore, because they've been shown doing something celebrities would do. All of a sudden, it's not scary (Hoffman, interview).

This quote suggests that forgoing subtlety in favour of conspicuousness reduces the believability of the character for the actual film:

Bringing the horror character into real-life like this shows there is no real danger to the character (...) preventing the suspension of scepticism (Damien, group).

Consequently, lack of measured subtlety reduces the consumer's ability to feel immersed within the narrative. Not revealing the monster allows consumers to imagine their own depiction of the character, which is potentially more threatening in experiential communications. For Damien, shock should be subtle and well matched with the film, citing the grafted *Bus-stop Posters for You're Next* (2011) as "creating a real sense of danger," which is carried into the film. This increases horror through "subconscious paranoia nurtured throughout the marketing" (Damien, group). Findings, thus, denote that threat believability and subtlety elicit the high shock value required for positive attitudes and positive, morally acceptable shock, so that consumers do not interpret them as strategies to mask mediocre film quality.

### Consumer Ethical Judgement and Consent Perceptions

Participants generally accept threat as a congruent part of horror communications. They also accept that threat can only effectively shock and create momentary fear if it surprises consumers. However, simulation of danger in the genre's campaigns can cross ethical boundaries. Participants do judge whether these appeals are morally acceptable, mostly by assessing unfairness and consequences in campaign contexts:

After this movie [IT] came out, generally people had a fear [of clowns]. But the clowns, those that were actually dressing up as clowns, going to parties and stuff... their jobs were cut off because of this movie... It obviously put off children; clowns are now scary and not seen like a cute, childish figure (Santanico, interview).

Thus, Santanico judges the ethics of IT's campaign on the negative consequences for unintended audiences (in this case, children and those who entertain as clowns, whose characters were once funny rather than scary). Participants' moral evaluations also consider a number of personal, situational and socio-cultural factors:

I have Christian beliefs and stuff, so if it's really devilish and deep from the pits of hell, then... Actual sacrificing of people and cutting up people's arms and sacrificing it to a God... I think that would be really, really bad, because it would go against people's beliefs... (Dawn, interview).

Here Dawn articulates the importance of her religious beliefs in shaping what types of threat appeals she would consider morally unacceptable. Aside from personal belief systems which may be violated, our participants highlighted the challenges involved in producing threat by channelling realistic events. Freddy (interview) identifies that the current climate of fear caused by "relentless terrorist attacks" means that consumers are increasingly "vulnerable to shock-tactics." Similarly, Annabelle (interview) questions the fairness of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) *Missing Persons Posters*, which implied actors had disappeared during filming. She argued they are "exploitative," "unfair" and "disrespectful" towards actual victims of abduction. Thus, threat-based experiential communications may cause undue psychological anxiety for consumers who are already fearful of non-fictional horrors, leading to negative ethical judgements and attitudes toward experiential communications. In overstepping ethical boundaries, these approaches to threat-based communications go above what consumers perceive to be an acceptable threshold for fear, threatening their sense of safety. In comparison, Freddy's responses to user-generated *Get Out* (2017) *Memes* demonstrate how well-contextualised threat produces positive responses:

I prefer this because it's not intrusive, take part if you want. Good. It wouldn't ruin someone's day. It invites you in (Freddy, interview).

The quote shows adequate contextualisation is essential for positive ethical judgement. Participants also discussed the role of emotions in their moral evaluations. *The Human Body Shop* provoked embodied reactions of disgust, with Shaun recoiling and covering his mouth with his hand. His body language conveyed strong shock, indicating marketing can overstep boundaries regarding graphic imagery that can physically affect viewers and create annoyance. The *Carrie* (2013) *Coffee Shop Telekinesis Prank* illustrates one of the conditions for consumer annoyance at out-of-context threat:

When I was going through a shopping centre, there was this flash-dance stunt, a bit like that Carrie one — I was like, f\*\*\* off. I was annoyed, because I've just gone into town to buy shoes (Billy, interview).

Billy's negative past experience generates negative judgement of this type of experiential shock. Similarly, Tiffany explains:

...If I was to go in a coffee shop and I saw that and then I find out later on it was just like a re-enactment of a movie, I wouldn't want to go and watch that movie... If I'd found out it was a setup, I would have been quite - basically still shocked, but annoyed at the same time, thinking, what? That's a bit unnecessary... I don't basically agree with that way of marketing (Tiffany, interview).

Dissatisfactory danger surprise hinders the psychological co-activation of negative and positive feelings, leading to negative ethical judgements, negative attitudes and negative viewing intentions (Fig. 1). Tiffany's and Billy's quotes contrast with Norman's earlier positivity at being entertained by experiential marketing. This is because Norman chooses when to engage. Whereas, in the examples above, Billy and Tiffany had no information or autonomy to choose whether to take part. Issues of consent, thus, intersect with consumers' ethical boundaries and conditions for moral acceptability of experiential threat. In evaluating marketing communications for *Dead Man Down* (2013) *Elevator Prank*, Hoffman illustrates these points:

These pranks, like the elevator one, are crossing something. Witnessing a murder can affect people for life — it's dangerous. The fact that they're doing this on random passers-by, I think that's an issue of consent. They haven't asked them if that's alright (Hoffman, interview).

His use of the word "dangerous" above illuminates the powerful nature of horror communications and their potentially negative effects on consumers. They become particularly unacceptable when participants have no information or choice over being shocked and therefore cannot consent. Similarly, Norman (interview) said scaring people is "*an act of aggression*," and "*that's when you get to the issue of consent*." Shaun also believed the *Ring Two* (2005) *Phone Prank* would make him feel "*targeted and deceived [...]* singled out," because it is designed to mislead and humiliate receivers. While horror communications are steeped in ideas of threat through shock, danger, fear and disgust, these experiential appeals produce negative consumer responses if non-consensual and poorly contextualised. Many participants highlight similar issues regarding experiential pranks:

I think it's pretty unfair for the people who don't know what's going on... The horror movie stage is completely different to this, because in the movie they were actually watching it to get scared, but these guys were doing their own thing, so I don't think that's right...

[When you go to the cinema] you know what you're expecting... but here imagine someone chokes on their brownie... Someone could easily have a fit (Krueger, interview).

Krueger's quote stresses infringements in consent transactions through non-consensual shock. Here, violations of participants' safety and fairness expectations are seen as violations of individual rights, with potential for tangibly negative consequences. This approach to threat leads participants to judge non-consensual experiential communications as negative and unethical, failing to achieve their persuasive goals. The quote also illustrates that, comparatively, the cinema provides a situated context where valid consumer consent to being shocked is autonomous, voluntary, intentional and informed (Goodin 1986; Beauchamp 2010), and thus ethical. However, participants' personal definitions of consent are flexible. They have their own ideas of how consent might be negotiated and expressed, and what is acceptable:

I think when you approach people, you can get a vibe off of them, whether they would be okay with it or not (Sadako, interview).

In this quote, Sadako suggests she would be satisfied with a situational gauging of her responses as a form of consent for experiential pranks. Additionally, Leatherface (interviewee) argues:

...Consent would then take away from what it is you're trying to do in the first place, so it wouldn't be possible to fully consent and be effective at the same time (Leatherface, interviewee).

In line with two of Miller and Wertheimer's (2010) criteria for moral transformation in consent transactions, Leatherface, Sadako and many other participants recognise that autonomous authorisation can undermine the purpose of experiential threat appeals. They also acknowledge it is not always possible for consumers to be informed of what they are consenting to in this commercial context. Leatherface continues:

As a consumer, you're just looking to be entertained... Whether you go on to watch the film or not, you want to feel like you've spent two minutes (...) involved in a situation, whereas from the marketing side, you want as many people as possible to see this film... The Chatroulette prank... what they do is quite a common thing [but] there's children on there as well [who] are not going to be the people who (...) watch the films (Leatherface, interview).

Here, Leatherface emphasises the bilateral nature of consent transactions, problematizing children's lack of capacity for autonomous consent regarding experiential marketing

content. Other participants are less flexible, seeing tacit or implied consent without explicit and express conditions as problematic. Krueger (interviewee) suggests a way around the impossibility of consensual shock:

To make it ethical, I would say (...) round up a couple of people and mention that they're going to get a jump scare in a month or so, so they wouldn't expect it when it actually comes. But... they've got the signature saying they're allowing themselves to be scared within any time of the month. So when it actually did happen they would have that jump scare initially, but then they realise what it is just that jump scare... Because you'd have more of a negative shock if you didn't get the consent of the actual individual because some people won't take the joke in a light way... (Krueger, interview).

Krueger's quote highlights how consumer consent can be negotiated and expressed in experiential contexts, without sacrificing the shock value of these campaigns. While Krueger's suggestion would still not lead to fully informed consent, it would mitigate issues of diminished shock value. It would also enable consumers to take responsibility for their side of consent transactions when being shocked for marketing purposes, in line with Miller and Wertheimer's (2010) third criteria for moral transformation. What we see emerging from the data is a spectrum of consent perceptions that intersect with ethical judgements, affecting attitudes, eWOM engagement and intention to engage in hedonic consumption.

## Consumer Ethical Judgement and eWOM

For most participants, shock value, variation in emotional tone and creativity are the main factors motivating forwarding intentions. When asked what would drive him to share content online, Hoffman replied:

Doing something that's a bit over-the-top, like breaking a taboo. Usually, that is what will get people talking [...] — like ooh, look at this (Hoffman, interview).

Similarly, despite disagreements around negative threat appeals, Annabelle (interview) explained that people “*want to be part of the debate, part of the buzz.*” Like Brown et al. (2010), who suggest that negative emotions encourage forwarding, our findings indicate that extremely shocking appeals spark online conversations. Despite being judged as unethical depending on context, extreme shock was not shown to inhibit eWOM, as Fig. 1 illustrates. Instead, it triggers motivation to share threat-based communication on social media:

I share things that... are really scary when it comes to horror movies. If it's really scary like, ‘we need to watch this,’ then I send it to my friends (Dawn, interview).

Dawn's quote illustrates that, as consumers become more involved with shocking messages, they become more motivated to spread messages online. Therefore, shock positively motivates forwarding intentions for horror campaigns, because it sparks conversation.

Further, Annabelle reflects participants' views on positive emotional appeal leading to increased forwarding intentions:

Funny is always a good thing to make people share stuff [...]. Humour is more likely to reach a wider demographic. People who are ambivalent about horror might be more likely to share it [...]. Humour doesn't polarise the audience as much — it isn't super scary, nor boring (Annabelle, interview).

Annabelle's quote implies that threat divides opinion, in contrast to humour, which is more universally accepted as a communication appeal. Ghostface and Pinhead offer a more nuanced perspective, seeing laughter as a mechanism for release:

I guess it's like, mentally, you know no one's at harm. There's a slight shock, but at the end of the day, everyone's fine, so you can kind of laugh it off (Ghostface, interview).

Pinhead highlights:

...Whenever you get shocked or scared, you tend to laugh and I think laughing is a defence mechanism... So I think you want to be shocked, but then you want to be able to laugh it off, whereas you don't want to be permanently shocked because otherwise, you'll be scarred for life. I think that's why you need that balance (Pinhead, interview).

Ghostface and Pinhead highlight the role of laughter coupled with post-shock release in achieving momentary shock, an essential component for enjoyment of experiential horror communications. Laughter indicated positive judgement of shock and motivation to share content online. This resonates with relief theory (Wilkins and Eisenbraun 2009), whereby consumers find relief in laughing after being scared. In experiential horror communications that consumers judge as ethical, shock is ephemeral. Consumers find release from laughing at the experience through concluding narratological explanations, which prevent negative emotional consequences. Similarly, Annabelle and Dawn suggest they would only share something if it made them “*laugh-out-loud.*”

Hence, participants considered laughing a common release response to being shocked positively and

congruently. However, several participants disapproved of humour-infused threat appeals, representing mixed forwarding intentions. Shaun (interview) said humour does not give a “*good impression of the film*,” so there is “*no way [he’d] share anything online about films promoted like that*.” Similarly, Rosemary (interview) and Esther (group) debated that downplaying scares through comedy made them less likely to share content. Humour-infused threat in experiential communications can diminish the believability of danger and the effectiveness of shock, where suspension of disbelief may not occur. This lack of corresponding emotional tone between campaign and film then leads to shock being considered boring or negative, failing to engender eWOM:

I think there is such thing as a boring shock because you could be shocked but bored at the same time and that [example] does it as well. When I first saw it, I was a little bit taken aback but just like, okay, and? I do know where this is going. Whereas, I think the other two... There is a little bit more drama to it (Pinhead, interview).

In discussing ‘boring shock,’ Pinhead suggests he would “definitely not share it,” arguing shocking drama, without humour, can increase shock value, emotional arousal and, thus, intention to share such content online. Overall, threat appeals without humour will likely engender effective, long-term eWOM. They will engender positive ethical judgment if shock value is high, ephemeral and accompanied of resonant emotional tone, creativity, believability and opportunities for post-experience release.

### Social Media Interactions, eWOM and Watching Intentions

The originality of the shocking content motivates participants’ forwarding intentions. Jason (interview) may “*talk about a trailer, but to a lesser extent*,” because they are “*ordinary*”. Norman recognised *The Human Body Shop* as “*the most original*,” so he would share this online. However, participants’ need for interaction and belonging also drive content sharing, highlighting the social relevance of sharing content online:

People like to belong to groups, to have a sense of belonging — so if everyone’s talking about something, then people want to be involved (Hoffman, interview).

The quote emphasises that consumers want to involve themselves with online discussion to signal belonging. Similarly, Jason desires to “*feel part of that collective group [...] to spark a conversation*.” However, if socialisation influences conative intentions more than attitudes, consumers may share threat-based content because of their desire to belong, regardless of whether they enjoy that content:

I don’t really like the Carrie one [prank], but because I know my friends would be into it, I’d share it with them (Ripley, group).

Ripley’s quote shows that subjective norms also predict forwarding intentions. If threat-based marketing communications are deemed acceptable by significant others, then subjective norms can mitigate the effects of negative consumer ethical judgement of threat-based communications, as Fig. 1 illustrates.

Furthermore, the thrill of being scared directly links to forwarding within groups, because “*everyone wants to experience the same emotion*” (Hoffman, interview). Similarly, Chucky (interview) wants to engage others by “*Snapchatting*” horror campaigns to others. This is because it makes “*it more of a group thing, where it’s not just a solitary experience*.” Chucky suggested that *Paranormal Activity’s Experiential Trailer* exploited ‘*belonging appeals*,’ by advertising cinemas full of people experiencing the film together. Thus, sense of belonging can reduce negative ethical judgement of experiential threat and “*makes it appeal to more fans*” (Chucky). As consumers discuss visiting the cinema together, this increases forwarding intentions.

However, the nature and capabilities of different social media platforms also affect participants’ sharing of threat-based content in their online groups:

If it’s a little bit more PG then I’ll put it on Facebook! If it was a little bit more fun in terms of what it is then yes, I’ll send it to my mum on WhatsApp or on Facebook. But if it’s a little bit more gruesome and a little bit more deathly and it looks like I’m a murderer or something, it’d just go on Snapchat, Instagram (Pinhead, interview).

Pinhead’s quote highlights the importance of media alignment and experientiality for forwarding intentions. It also highlights the types of shock involved, because experiences are meaningful to in-group identities and related ideas of what is right and wrong in some social media more than others. Additionally, many participants were more likely to share shocking content privately than publicly. That is how they can share such content without the social consequences of other consumers’ moral judgements:

I’d be more likely to talk about [a campaign] privately — face-to-face or via Facebook messenger (Esther, group). Yeah, talking privately is less risky. I feel judged for everything I post (Myers, group).

Here participants opt for private conversations where they are exempt from judgement from their wider friends’ list. Nevertheless, participants believe viral marketing works effectively to promote horror films, bringing them to the “*forefront of your mind*” (Hannibal, group). Increased



‘hype’ leads to “*an atmosphere of excitement, fear and intrigue*” (Samara, interview), and increased intrigue impacts watching intentions:

I would probably see the movie, if only to ascertain whether the film lives up to the hype (Damien, group).

Damien’s quote suggests eWOM and viral marketing act as “*a sort of word-of-mouth review*” (Jason, group), supporting literature which addresses eWOM as trustworthy. Thus, in conjunction with trailers and reviews, positively judged threat-based experiential campaigns and eWOM engagement influence intention to watch, as Fig. 1 illustrates.

## Discussion and Implications

Our findings foreground consumers’ perspectives on marketing ethics, as these voices remain under-represented in business ethics debates (Shabbir et al. 2018). In answering our research question (how do consumers judge the morality of threat-based experiential marketing communication campaigns?), we develop three main contributions to relevant literature.

Firstly, this research extends theory in the area of ethical judgement. Existing research examines ethical judgement in organisational contexts (Trevino 1992; Jones 1991), or consumers’ own ethical or unethical behaviours (Hunt and Vitell 1986; Vitell and Muncy 2005; Vitell et al. 2016). By focusing on the significance of consent for eliciting positive consumer moral responses to experiential communications, we progress understanding of ethics in the marketplace. We do this by foregrounding the intersection between perceived contextual consent and ethical judgement. We establish that consumer information and autonomy are essential for participants’ positive, ethical judgement of experiential threat, as these are dimensions of morally transformative consent (Miller and Wertheimer 2010; Stannard 2015; de Graaf 2006; Kleinig 2010). In unpacking the flexible, multidimensional interconnections between ethical judgment and consent, we determine that consumer perceptions of consequences and fairness in consent transactions lend contextualised normative approval to experiential marketing practice.

Secondly, our research adds to literature on emotions in consumer ethical judgement (Singh et al. 2016), by determining that negative emotions can elicit positive consumer ethical judgement. Our findings demonstrate that experientiality in marketing communication intensifies shock allure and the ‘safe danger’ threat, as in Hanich (2011) work. These communications lead to strong emotional reactions, encouraging eWOM and hedonic consumption. Similar to Andrade and Cohen (2007), our findings show co-activation of positive and negative emotions, and the active desire to experience fear. They also show that threat-based experiential

communications deliberately eliciting negative consumer emotions can lead to positive consumer attitudes, eWOM engagement and intentions. More importantly, these strong emotions trigger negative ethical judgement where consumers are not ready to experience such marketing communications, and/or where consumer perceived criteria for morally transformative consent transactions are not met.

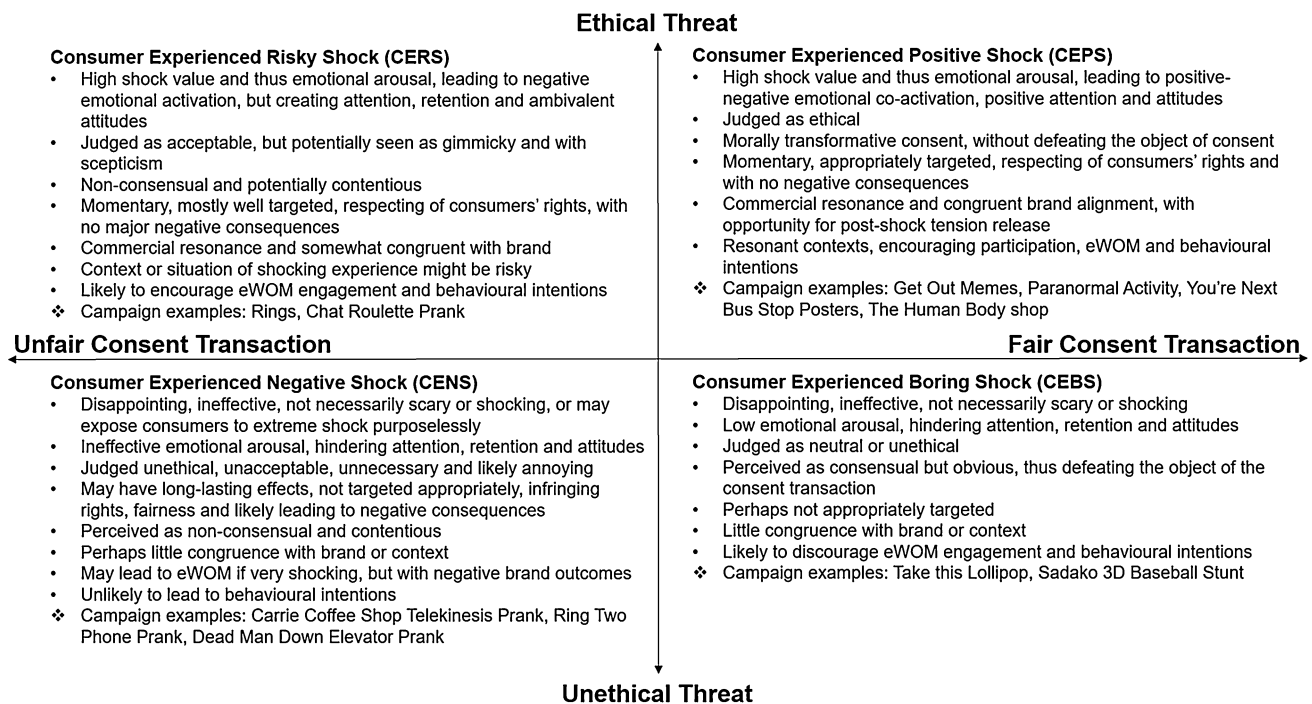
Thirdly, and building on the previous two contributions, our research adds an original perspective to prior works in marketing ethics, which position threat appeals as morally problematic (Kadic-Maglajlic et al. 2017; Putrevu and Swimberghek 2013; Sabri 2017). It does so by contributing an original concept to ethical judgement theorisation, namely consumer-experienced positive shock (CEPS). We develop CEPS further by drawing on Fig. 2.

In highlighting the multidimensional nature of consumer responses to experiential threat appeals through the intersection between ethical judgement and consent transactions, we illuminate the criteria that can make experienced shock positive or negative, boring or risky. Thus, we develop CEPS in relation to other types of shock within a typology (Fig. 2), including dimensions of ethical judgement of threat (y axis) and degrees of fairness in consent transactions (x axis). The typology is not intended as a rigid tool. Instead, we acknowledge the fluidity of the depicted dimensions, including the malleability and circumstantial nature of consumer ethical judgements (Sundar and Kellaris 2017), and of consent transactions (Miller and Wertheimer 2010).

Starting with the CEPS quadrant (top right), we suggest that CEPS leads to believability perceptions (Brennan and Binney 2010; Tomko 2007). This occurs where visceral shock enables positive and negative emotions to co-occur (Andrade and Cohen 2007). Our findings illustrate that CEPS encourages consumer participation in viscerally shocking experiential campaigns, if congruent with the hedonic consumption experience being marketed. Therefore, CEPS is a distinct emotional response to those aroused by social marketing (Scarpaci and Burke 2016; Tannenbaum et al. 2015; Cronin and Hopkinson 2017), as it seeks to encourage rather than prevent consumer participation, and is clear in its commercial and hedonic orientation. Another CEPS dimension is its ephemerality, leading to positive ethical judgement. The momentary nature of some threat-based communications allows consumers to find experiential release, at times resulting in laughter (a positive consequence). This is qualitatively different to other uses of threat in social marketing, which aim for a lingering impact to provoke long-term behavioural change. Additionally, our data show that CEPS requires threat that is purposefully congruent with a brand, product or experience, spurring consumer attention and memory.

Furthermore, CEPS can foster eWOM engagement where experienced shock is high on emotional arousal through





**Fig. 2** A typology of consumer ethical judgements of experienced shock

negative consumer emotions. CEPS-driven eWOM engagement also requires a good fit between the experiential threat appeal, their medium and context. This, in turn, positively influences behavioural intentions. Thus, experiential marketing campaigns leading to CEPS are likely to effectively attract and engage groups of consumers online. As eWOM engenders persuasion and positive consumer affect (Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Frings 2017), we propose this can initiate long-lasting consumer involvement with brands and/or experiences. Situational and contextual factors, coupled with consumer information search, can also influence consumer moral judgements of shock value and their behavioural intentions.

Given its capacity to generate high consumer awareness, CEPS is particularly relevant for film launches. However, it can also be applied to services or other hedonic consumption contexts in the leisure (e.g. theme parks) and cultural industries (e.g. theatre plays, performance art installations and exhibitions), for example. CEPS evidences consumers' inclinations for ethical judgements based on fairness, consequences and context; it stresses the need to respect consumers' rights and ensure no negative consequences for consumers. CEPS necessitates morally transformative consent including information and autonomy, without defeating the object of consent (which is to be shocked). Consumers expect CEPS to be momentary, appropriately targeted, with commercial resonance as well as congruent brand and media alignment. Consumers also expect it to provide opportunities

for post-shock tension release, in turn encouraging participation, eWOM and positive behavioural intentions. Thus, CEPS aligns the moral norms of marketers and consumers (Wempe 2009). Examples of experiential horror film campaigns leading to CEPS include Get Out Memes, Paranormal Activity, You're Next Bus-stop Posters, The Human Body Shop.

However, consumer responses to, and moral judgements of, threat appeals may differ depending on whether consumers clearly understand such material as promotional content. We establish that consumers question the morality of threat-based experiential marketing where the nature and purpose of experientially shocking communications lack clarity, thus judging other types of shock negatively.

Our typology establishes that other types of shock are comparatively less effective. By applying the same dimensions used to develop CEPS (Fig. 2), we argue that consumers can experience risky shock (CERS, top-left quadrant). CERS still requires marketers to create high shock value. It might be ambivalently judged by consumers as acceptable, but potentially gimmicky. CERS is less consensual, leading consumers to judge it less favourably. This occurs due to its high shock value, coupled with a potentially contentious context or situation, where consumers are targeted when off-guard. Nevertheless, CERS can still encourage consumer eWOM engagement, given its high emotional arousal. However, it may lead consumers to judge the brand, service or experience as unethical.

Conversely, the two types of shock within the bottom quadrants are ineffective. Our research participants found consumer-experienced boring shock (CEBS) disappointing, not necessarily scary or that shocking. Thus, CEBS provokes low emotional arousal in experiential campaigns. Because of lack of appropriate targeting, or perhaps due to negative consequences for consumers, CEBS can be judged as morally neutral or unethical. It can be perceived as consensual but obvious, defeating the object of the threat consent transaction, which is to shock. There may be little congruence with the brand, service or context. It is therefore likely to discourage eWOM, leading to negative behavioural intentions.

Lastly, the least morally promising type of shock is consumer-experienced negative shock (CENS). CENS suggests consumer disappointment, where the appeals used are either ineffective (not necessarily scary or shocking), or extremely shocking for no reason. CENS, therefore, leads to negative emotional arousal without positive outcomes, hindering attention, memory and attitudes. Consumers judge CENS as unethical, highly unacceptable, unnecessary and likely annoying. CENS is also non-consensual. These perceptions may be a result of inappropriate targeting strategies, infringing consumers' ideas of what is fair, their tastes or leading to negative consumer consequences including prolonged shock. CENS may also be a result of lack of congruence with the brand, service or context. While this type of shock may lead to eWOM, this eWOM will not be positive for brands. Experiential horror film campaigns exemplifying the four types of shock are plotted on the typology (Fig. 2).

## Conclusions and Areas for Future Research

This paper investigates how consumers judge the morality of threat-based experiential marketing communication campaigns that elicit negative consumer emotions. Taking an interpretive research approach within the context of horror film communications, we establish how consumer ethical judgements of such communications, coupled with online social interactions, affect attitudes, eWOM engagement and behavioural intentions. More importantly, this research foregrounds the role of consumer ethical judgement and consent perceptions in shaping such consumer attitudes, eWOM and behavioural intentions.

We establish the original concept of consumer-experienced positive shock (CEPS) and define it as a consensual, ephemeral shock value, which consumers judge as ethical and which can be used to encourage consumer participation in experiential communication campaigns. As CEPS is momentary and leads to hedonic outcomes, we show that CEPS differs from the threat appeals consumers experience in social marketing, where the goal is enduring behavioural change. By employing Miller and Wertheimer's (2010)

theory of consent transactions, we determine the possibilities and limits of consent as morally transformative within the context of experiential campaigns, where consumers might otherwise judge such communications as unethical.

This research contributes original insights to existing literature on ethical judgement theorisation, by highlighting the intersection between ethical judgement and consent. Our research also adds to studies on the role of emotions in consumer ethical judgement, and contributes the new concept of CEPS to the area of consumer and marketing ethics. Further, we develop CEPS in relation to three additional types of shock within a consumer-experienced shock typology, based on dimensions of ethical judgement and consent transactions. Thus, the typology can be applied to additional hedonic or services marketing contexts, where the use of experiential threat in marketing communication might require further ethical analyses against the dimensions and conditions outlined through the typology.

Future research can examine how the four shock types can be applied to diverse marketing or business ethics contexts, where examination of stakeholder responses to experiences of shock or fear might be needed. Additionally, as consent, ethical judgement and attitudes toward threat appeals are situational and socio-culturally dependent, future studies can use a larger or comparable pool of horror film goers to extend the findings of this research to diverse socio-cultural contexts. Such studies would then help to identify potential similarities and differences regarding how these factors affect eWOM engagement and behaviour, particularly in countries where mass violence might be a more pronounced issue.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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